Complexity and Choice:
Reassessing Support for Women in Leadership Programs

Barbara Groombridge & Suzette Worden

Professor Suzette Worden is Professor of Design at Curtin University of Technology. She teaches within the Faculty of Built Environment, Art and Design, supervises postgraduate students and contributes to leadership program events on research leadership. She is currently developing collaborative research projects related to Western Australian material resources. Before joining Curtin she was Reader in Digital Media and Director of Research in the Faculty of Art, Media and Design, University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE), UK. Her interest in digital media was developed through involvement in collaborative projects on the use of computers for art and design education. s.worden@curtin.edu.au

Barbara Groombridge is Manager of the Leadership Development Unit, Academic Services at Curtin University of Technology. She has been the ATN-WEXDEV institutional contact at Curtin since the program's inception in 1996, planning and implementing an annual development program for women across the University which includes research and promotion initiatives. Barbara has a Master of Science (Science Education) with 20 years' teaching experience and has taught across the education sector (primary to tertiary) in the UK and Australia. Currently also a doctoral student, her research interests are associated with leadership and gender within higher education. b.groombridge@curtin.edu.au

Abstract

Advice and support for achieving promotion is often one of the main tasks of leadership programs aimed at women in higher education. This paper will consider how leadership development strategies can be extended to meet current developments in higher education, where there is a need to respond to increasing complexity within the system, resulting from changes in government policy and the impact of globalisation.

We propose that there is a need to address diversity in leadership roles to meet the challenge of complexity, as one outcome of a focus on promotion in leadership programs has been to emphasise and reinforce conventional managerial, hierarchical expectations of leadership. In this context, leadership is predominantly role-related and positional in nature. The ability to develop and change circumstances is gained through the power given by the role. Women in these roles are most often seen as successful leaders when they additionally demonstrate a nurturing and supportive approach.

The paper will address the limitations of adopting this view of leadership and examine how leadership can be broadened by and for women in higher education. The paper will consider how different models of leadership in teaching and in research can be developed, and then their potential to influence broader leadership programs in higher education management.

Keywords Leadership programs, promotion, leadership styles, learning organisations.

Introduction

The Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act (1984) has many objectives, one of which is to achieve diversity within employment ('Sex Discrimination Act. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission' 1984).[1] In Australia the Commonwealth Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986, which was amended as the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act in 1999 (the EOWW Act), has further supported equality for women in employment ('Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act' 1999). Managing diversity however focuses on the needs of an organisation as distinct from the needs of an individual. All universities have statements of affirmative action within their Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies to support the creation of a diverse staff and student body. For example, at Curtin University:

> A diverse workplace brings a real strength to the University by bringing a wealth of different experiences to the organisation at all levels of its operation making it more effective, interesting, innovative, productive and customer-focussed (Curtin University of Technology 2006).

If universities are to achieve equality of experience for all staff then women need to participate in all aspects of university life, including decision-making, which involves leadership. Twenty years on from the EEO Act within Australia, women, despite their increasing representation at all other levels of staffing within universities, are still significantly under-represented as leaders with higher education (only 7 out of 39 Vice Chancellors in Australia universities are women). The glass ceiling effect (the invisible nature of barriers to advancement) where women are unable to break through into the higher levels of leadership and management is still prevalent in higher education and, although numbers of women in leadership positions are improving, the rate of progress is extremely slow. In 2004 16% of women were at the professorial academic level E as against 54% of women at academic level A (Winchester et al. 2005: 28).

The work environment is becoming more globalised in its conditions and expectations. A feature of this is a sharper contrast in the differing needs of the three 'generations' - X, Y and baby-boomers. With their differing needs and aspirations, they will require more individually responsive leadership and management training (Nicholson & Nairn 2006). People performance will become a greater focus than asset performance. Executive leaders will require specific skills and expertise to deal with this new model of the workplace, which will involve the ability to improve performance, and manage a generation of older workers who are staying in the workforce beyond what was considered the normal retirement age. It has been suggested that leaders in the future workforce within higher education will require quite different approaches as they reflect trends in the higher education environment of internationalisation, competing global markets, and managing a more diverse workforce (Nicholson & Nairn 2006)

In this paper we examine how women's leadership programs, which crossover the needs of the individual and the organisation, have drawn attention to diversity issues and also contributed to the formation of a 'diverse workplace'. In this context we ask: in what ways have these leadership programs been important? Then we consider the future: what are the current

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[1] There was also parallel state legislation in Australia, for example the WA State Equal Opportunity Act (1984)

challenges for leadership programs? How can these programs continue to be effective? Do women's leadership programs need to change?

In the spirit of 'continuous improvement' this paper includes the voices of those who have experienced leadership programs and then presents an assessment of some recent studies of leadership theory, which might constructively inform the further development of leadership programs in higher education.

Context: Higher Education

Under-representation of women in universities is due to a complex interplay between several areas including under-representation on decision-making bodies; success being recognised through masculine 'norms'; interruptions to career paths that undermine competitiveness and other complexities of balancing home and work; reticence to apply for senior posts; starting academic careers at a lower level than men; lesser involvement in research activities; and informal organisational obstacles (Carrington & Pratt 2003: 7-8).

In response to these challenges, leadership programs have operated in a context where improvements have been documented and celebrated and where careful analysis has shown where more work needs to be done. In the 1990s strong policy frameworks were advocated (Bradley 1999: 17). But since then government educational reforms, such as the deregulated fee environment, have hindered progress towards equity and there are new gender divisions emerging in technology related courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level, which are likely to affect gender balance within the future Australian workforce (Carrington & Pratt 2003: 16). Globalisation, the take up of new technologies, and a devaluing of the role of the academic profession have also shaped Australian universities, as have the business concepts and implementation of the 'enterprise' and 'corporate' university, which challenges work patterns loosely defined as collegial (Marginson & Considine 2000). For individuals the university workplace is now more complex; tasks include teaching, administration, management, community service, research and consultancy, which are increasingly more difficult to balance or fit into the time available (Houston, Meyer & Paewai 2006). According to Churchman, academic staff has to develop a range of unrelated and non-complementary skills and undertake the disparate range of activities. If these different facets of academia are not recognised, because the drive to create the corporate university reduces complexity, there will be 'a gap in the organisational knowledge, which can lead to oversights and artificial simplifications by university management' which 'can impede the professional development of academic staff (Churchman 2006: 7).

To support staff, women's leadership programs are therefore faced with the challenge of equipping attendees with the skills to creatively manage complexity.

The Development of Women's Leadership Programs

Many Australian universities developed programs in the 1990s for women, which were focussed on executive leadership development which included job related skills and self-awareness raising tools in order to assist them to move up the career ladder within higher education. Programs were originally funded from Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) or other equity initiative funding and at the cessation

of the funding were taken up by the individual universities who recognised the importance of such initiatives. Some programs were set up as a result of special funding from Vice Chancellors' strategic initiative or discretionary funding projects. Targets for such Programs, which were diverse in nature, identified specific groups of senior women who had potential to be leaders, or others were open to all women from both academic and general staff. Those involving selection processes targeted a smaller number and have recorded many successes over a long period; for example, the University of Western Australia Women in Leadership Program (de Vries 2005; Eveline 2004).

Women in leadership programs have tended to take on three dimensions reflected in the literature of addressing personal, situational and societal aspects in order to try and fix the problem of why women are under represented at higher levels within higher education (Collins, Chrisler & Quina 1998).

The Australian Technology Network, Women's Executive Development (ATN-WEXDEV) Program is an initiative developed to include the five ATN universities across Australia and has been acknowledged as a successful initiative since its inception in 1996. This Program has sought to influence university culture as well as in the earlier stages, provide professional development workshops on entrepreneurship, financial management and research skills as well as developing networks between the institutions and globally.

Although a 'program' that supports the promotion of women to senior positions, it has developed a wider agenda over the past few years, which has broadened the debate and has gone from fixing people to looking at the culture and creating greater awareness of the context that might need to change rather than the individual. The five ATN universities have run internal programs alongside the ATN WEXDEV program. For example, Queensland University of Technology have run a successful Quality in Women in Leadership Program with well-documented outcomes as well as a raft of other programs targeted at women (Queensland University of Technology 2006).

Curtin University of Technology did not run a program specifically for women until the collaborative ATN WEXDEV program began in 1996. There had been funding for a mentoring program for academic women with Murdoch University, outcomes of which were clear, well documented and successful in reaching its stated goals. Documented outcomes, for example, the Australian Technology Network, Women's Executive Development (ATN-WEXDEV) Program have included: understanding of the culture of organisations, strengthened networks and greater access to promotions or professional development advancement as well as those associated with the acquisition of leadership and management skills.

Other programs have been developed as a result of equity practitioners' interventions and have supported universities strategic goals such as those concerning the development of research skills, considered essential for success at promotion. Programs, such as 'Women Research 21' (at UNSW) have extended this brief to create spaces within which women develop alternative subject positions, intervene in institutional policy-making and challenge practices that exclude or marginalise women (Devos 2004).

Flinders University (Adelaide, South Australia) developed a mentoring program for early career women researchers in 1998, which has been documented for being effective in assisting the research careers of some 70 participants (Gardiner 2005). This project provides

documented examples of the effectiveness of mentoring as a professional development strategy in a unique longitudinal study.

Some of the early programs have provided role models for later programs. For example a program at the University of Tasmania was the result of mentoring from those involved in running the UWA program (University of Tasmania 2006). These examples give an indication of the range of options on offer. These examples are indicative of trends.
The ATN WEXDEV conferences offer occasions for critical reflection and the on-going gathering of examples, with the complete story yet to be told and beyond the scope of this paper.

The Experience of Women's Leadership Programs

Leadership programs for women across the higher education sector within Australia, have tended to prioritise the role of the promotions process to enable women to break through the glass ceiling in two main ways, that is:

- Promotion generally within wider context of becoming more managerial or have leadership role - positional emphasis;
- Promotion explicitly targeted as main aim.

A recent research project and report, generated for the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee investigated promotion policies and practices of 34 universities within Australia and interviewed key staff from 17 universities (Winchester et al. 2005). The researchers hypothesised that the under-representation of women in academia reflected barriers within their promotion processes, which was affected by the gendered conception of 'merit'. This was not found to be the case, however there was a significant omission of a statement on Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) from 47% of the policies surveyed. A research based report like this can not only generate data but at the same time can demonstrate that in general, promotions policies and processes are on the whole fair and equitable. Many leadership programs still see breaking through the glass ceiling in academia as the ultimate goal. Cross-university sector comparisons on levels of both academic and general staff are only part of the picture. Other research, demonstrates that in some cases, women are not interested in management positions (Chesterman, Ross-Smith & Peters 2005). So are present leadership programs meeting the needs of the women in academia who may well be involved in leading teaching and research initiatives but not interested in becoming 'managerial'?

In discussions with participants of recent leadership initiatives that include women seen by their peers as leaders in research and teaching, as well as those with positional leadership responsibility, women certainly viewed themselves as having leadership responsibility. A National Teaching Award recipient mentioned how both her peers and students saw her leadership as being one of 'expert' leader.

> Students see me as an expert, making professional decisions and nurturing them, guiding and mentoring.

Also their experience over many years of interactions with colleagues and students signalled this and reinforced the expert title. Of equal importance to this academic (Associate Professor through recent promotion process) was the recognition by her peers of her scholarly approach

to her work and the impact that having a research profile had along with her teaching expertise, demonstrating the nexus between teaching and research:

> Yes, [I am seen as a leader by] people I work directly with – my colleagues in my Department – collaborative teaching, my position as co-ordinator, [I] have been in the role a long time and have the experience and knowledge of other institutions. This broader experience is a combination of factors as I am also aware of the research in teacher mathematics education I have a research base to draw on the field - scholarly practice enhances leadership. New ideas, leadership, innovation, reflective practice, what can we do better? [I have an] awareness of the impact of teaching initiatives, an informed nature of the work.

With regard to her recent promotion she recognised that:
> The status [of becoming Associate Professor] demonstrates a respect for good teaching – to achieve it is very difficult-research is important as well. In university leadership roles, they don't have an 'apprenticeship'.

She believed that the leadership definition within the University promotion's documentation was very narrow and that identifying talent in leadership was not good stating: 'We don't invest in talent'.

Another academic [research team leader], recently returned from the ATN WEXDEV capability leadership workshops expressed the value of attending such a workshop (three days' duration), and drew attention to learning from others:
> I learnt new styles from others who are more experienced. I learnt a lot about dealing with difficult and different personalities. I learned to understand the differences and similarities between management and leadership.

An attendee, who was a Head of Department, saw her leadership role as more managerial and strongly situated in the context of improving performance (budgets, and curriculum development) in her department and faculty. For her, leadership was demonstrated by:
> I will not ask anyone to do anything that they cannot do. I demonstrate a good work ethic, undertake workshops to improve my skills in management and leadership and I am developing a Departmental five year plan. I have the attitude that I have a lot to learn and I think this keeps me open to new possibilities.

In contrast to this another participant of the ATN WEXDEV program felt and emphasis on management skills limited the potential of the program and did not offer leadership development to any participants who were interested in leadership positions beyond, or different from, those of Head of Department or Dean.
> We were provided with plenty of information on skills development - time, task and change management - managing difficult people - but leadership, as a concept, was not adequately explored. We were encouraged to cope, but not aim high.

To continue to be successful, leadership programs need to make sure they serve the diversity of conceptions of leadership and the diversity of potential contributions that women wish to make. To further investigate the questions previously asked, (what are the current challenges for leadership programs? How can these programs continue to be effective? Do women's leadership programs need to change?), the following themes have emerged from these initial discussions which could be further explored in planning future programs:

- The emergence of the 'expert' leader, leading to a wider definition of leadership, than that currently defined in promotion procedures;
- Styles of leadership;
- Differences and similarities between management and leadership;
- The importance of context;
- Ambition – related to the stated aims and goals of the programs.

Do women's leadership programs need to change?

A report from the University of Exeter, UK supported the work of James and Burgoyne (James & Burgoyne 2002) who identified best practice principles for leadership development, including three strategic imperative principles, six strategic choice principles and an evaluation principle (Bolden 2005: 47). Most importantly, they emphasised the role of monitoring and evaluating the impact of leadership development, which means a 'learning loop', is integrated into further program development. Within the university sector, this important stage happens when funding is continued and the program is well supported by senior management through an ongoing basis (de Vries 2005). As a contribution to this 'learning loop' process some starting positions for examining these themes are now discussed which have been developed from our work on women's leadership opportunities within the higher education sector.

1. The emergence of the 'expert' leader, leading to a wider definition of leadership, than that currently defined in promotion procedures
This movement away from the more generalist leader/manager to the 'expert' has the potential to be a significant element of a different leadership approach. The expert leader will need specific skills in the environment which will require a leadership style moving away from one of a goal and vision setting approach to one requiring deep experiences.

> The shift towards experts also reflects changes in the workforce. A more skilled and highly educated workforce will need less direction, and will typically value it less. It will no longer be sufficient for executives to play co-ordination and goal setting roles. They must also be experts in the subject matter at hand or bring deep experience to the issues being addressed. These trends suggest the age of the generalist manager is coming to an end. (Nicholson & Nairn 2006).

2. Styles of leadership
The current literature on leadership has paid a great deal of attention to leadership styles. Links have also been made between leadership styles and the most effective forms of program delivery (Muijs et al. 2006). These discussions should underpin further planning of programs if they have not already been considered. There are also some interesting relationships to be drawn out between styles of leadership and the kind of university within which they might be practiced. So the form of leadership program delivery should be considered as much as the actual content.

Ramsden describes leadership as a 'process of supporting, managing and developing and inspiring colleagues' and that leadership can be 'exercised by everyone, from the vice-chancellor to the casual car parking attendant. Leadership is to do with how people relate to each other' (Ramsden 1998: 4). This ideal of distributed leadership is best suited to university structures that are predominantly collegial or non-hierarchical, but the emphasis on change,

which Ramsden sees as a fundamental focus of successful leadership, means that transformational leadership is also important for universities. Transformational leadership is 'leadership that transforms individuals and organizations through an appeal to values and long-term goals.' Improvements in teaching and learning are mostly associated with transformational leadership (Muijs et al 2006: 88). Ramsden concentrates on transformational leadership when he targets 'middle managers' - the heads of academic departments - as those most in need of advice on leadership to then enable others to achieve and focus on change. In doing so he reflects an interpretation of transformational leadership where the individual leader is central to change. This has been taken up in leadership programs for women, where getting women into a managerial role has been a key focus for the program for example the ATN-WEXDEV leadership initiative was targeted at aspiring Heads of academic schools and departments.

Transformational leadership is suited to complex situations and involves leaders communicating a vision for the organization. It involves taking a long-term view, which is often hard to achieve, but if successful it raises levels of consciousness, emphasises moral purpose and commitment, and encourages followers to go beyond self-interest. Problems with transformational leadership include its dependence on charismatic leaders who inspire others to follow. This role rests on skills that are difficult to teach or acquire and if it leads to narrowly defined personality expectations, can limit the diversity of potential candidates for leadership positions. Influence is often a two-way journey between people and culture; the traditional view of the leader moulding organisational culture breaks down where 'organisational culture is equally likely to itself change and mould leadership' (Muijs et al 2006: 89).

Distributed leadership is favoured in contexts where these weaknesses of transformational leadership are apparent. When considering the organization as a whole distributed leadership is seen to be better suited to collegial processes. The tensions between transformational and distributed styles of leadership make visible the tensions between changes coming from the organisational structures of a university as distinct from the leadership of 'heroic' leaders who inspire others. These tensions have to be considered in the planning of women's leadership programs. Proctor-Thomson has supported the identification of tensions between individuals and the organisation in an extensive literature survey of leadership reports on the UK public sector (Proctor-Thomson 2006). The concentration on individuals can lead to insufficient attention being paid to specific systemic inventions of organisational development such as promotion of diversity in middle and senior management positions.

Successful leadership programs function as a reflection and a contributor to the kind of university it serves. Ramsden describes four characteristics of universities, which are found in different combinations in current universities; namely collegial, bureaucratic, enterprise and corporate. (Ramsden 1998: 265). For each of these types there is a different style of management: collegial universities have leaders that represent the academic group; bureaucratic universities have managers who are more senior in the hierarchy as leaders; enterprise universities have leaders who represent clients; customers and staff; and in corporate universities, leaders represent the CEO. The enterprise university is seen by Ramsden to be the most effective model for embracing an uncertain future; in this context, leaders represent a diverse group of stakeholders. Leadership and management in the enterprise university are concerned with the development of professional skills learned through education and reflection on experience (Ramsden 1998: 265).

3. Differences and similarities between management and leadership

Muijs et al (2006) have also found some relationships (but not causality) between leadership development and leadership behaviours, with experiential leadership development related to transformational leadership, course-based leadership development to distributed leadership and individual-based leadership development with transactional leadership (Muijs et al. 2006: 103). They have also found that transformational behaviours are linked to leadership whilst values and vision and transactional behaviours are equated with management. Leaders develop ideas however managers put them into practice. However, leadership development programs do not identify mechanisms by which vision can be achieved-how do current leadership programs provide for this strategic imperative, clearly necessary for a twenty first century leader?

Transactional leadership is concerned with 'relationships of exchange' and is commonly used by most leaders and associated with their managerial role. It is leadership that can be more easily measured and therefore rewarded in a tangible way. For example where there might be financial rewards for extra effort as part of a performance management strategy or it can be documented and rewarded through a promotions' process. Transformational behaviours are often linked to leadership values and vision whilst transactional behaviours are equated with management meeting targets (Muijs et al. 2006: 96). Leaders develop ideas; managers put them into practice. The challenge for program delivery is where the boundaries of management and leadership intersect. Expert leaders need good management skills but good managers might not wish to take on leadership roles. Is it possible to offer a program that meets the needs of both groups?

4. The importance of context

Experiential leadership development - learning through structured experience, mentoring, job shadowing, secondments, visits, sabbaticals are strategies that have been incorporated into many different programs to varying extents over the past ten years or so. Other strategies focussing on individual development such as self-study, planned project work, (paper-based and distance learning including, course based or collective workshops, seminars, short courses part-time and longer term have also met needs.

> Universities are renown for promoting people who demonstrate excellence in one domain (such as teaching or research) into jobs which require experience and skills in quite a different domain (such as people or financial management) (Yielder & Codling 2004: 327).

What leadership development opportunities will best meet needs after the enterprise/corporate university? Those programs that have the most impact on the institution demonstrate that experiential internal (in-house) professional development is more effective than external as it builds both individual and organizational needs

5. Ambition

We suggest that leadership programs should be more ambitious in their aims to meet the goals of their target participants in higher education. They should aim to embrace change as well as complexity as a means of supporting diversity. This means understanding transformation through learning. Ramsden's comment from 1998 is still relevant:

> The product of universities is change. The business of a university is learning. The job of academic leaders is to help people learn."(Ramsden 1998: 267).

This emphasis on the learning organisation will also enable some balance to be achieved between the individual and the institutional needs and expectations. Programs should initiate rather than wait for change.

Conclusion

We suggest that leadership programs for women need to be re-thought to cope with increasing complexity in the system. Programs need to be extended and funded to continue to 'educate' women about the system, to understand the barriers and then find strategies that reflect their personal goals and aspirations. Women's needs within the workforce are complex: for example: worklife balance issues and generational change, with greater numbers of baby-boomers in the workforce. Women's career phases are different to that of men as they cope with family responsibilities which might mean differently calibrated work models of full-time, part-time and then returning to full-time as their children grow.

The globalisation of the workplace will require leaders and managers to acquire new skills to compete with complexity focussed on a continued approach to learning. New models of organisational development are needed, such as in this approach first noted by Senge:

> A *Learning Organisation* is an organisation where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together (Senge 1993);

and reinforced by a United Nations task force on Education for the Twenty-first Century:
> Four 'pillars' of education for the future are concerned with learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together (and with others), and learning to be (UNESCO 1999).

Universities are institutions of learning - that is their core business. If they are to access the full potential of all of their staff then it is imperative that strategies and programs continue to support the development of more that fifty percent of their workforce who happen to be women. Leadership development programs over the past twenty years have had a broad ranging impact on women and their careers in academia, but there is still a long way to go.

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